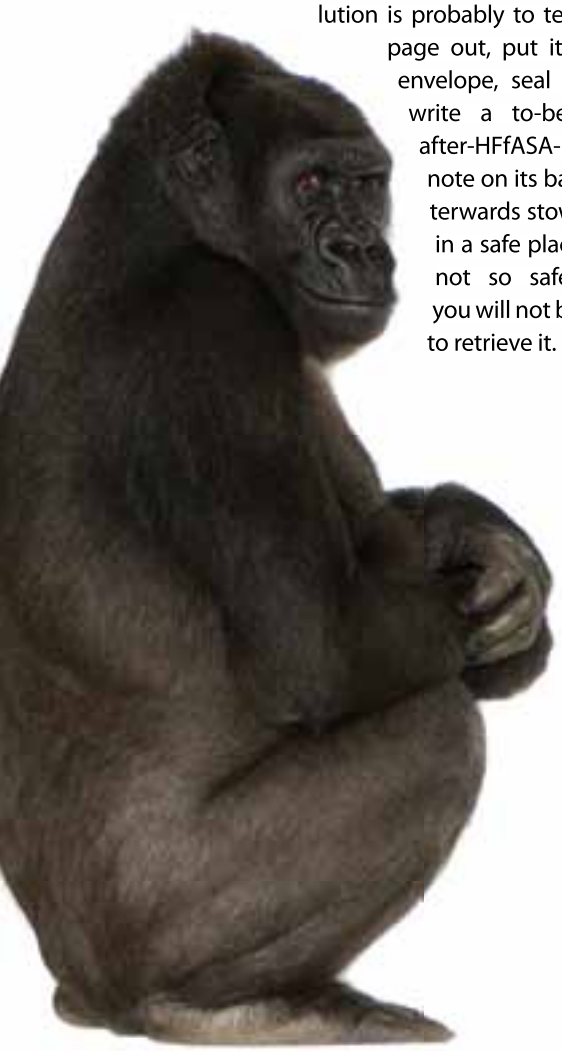
Gorillas in our midst

By Alberto Iovino

If you are ever planning on attending a Human Factor for ATM Safety Actors course, you should better not read the following lines: the murderer is going to be revealed, and most of your future fun would be spoiled...

On the other hand, you might eventually change your mind, and decide not to take the class any more, or life will maybe hinder you from doing it, or you may simply wish to read about them after the course and enjoy their content with the additional flavour of hindsight (not the magazine). So, unless you collect the full set of issues of Hindsight, meaning the magazine, the best solution is probably to tear this page out, put it in an envelope, seal it and write a to-be-read-after-HFfASA-course note on its back, afterwards stowing it in a safe place, but not so safe that you will not be able to retrieve it.



So, if you do ever attend a Human Factor for Safety Actors course, which I incidentally recommend, sooner or later you will be shown a video where a bunch of young mobsters engage in throwing a basketball to each other. Before playing it, the teacher will assign you what he, or she, will present as a very challenging task, i.e. counting the number of passes of the ball between folks wearing a shirt of the same colour, somehow suggesting all sorts of hidden and unexpected tricks and obstacles to what may appear a rather simple task. The video will run, you will watch very carefully and count, possibly developing a feeling of increasing self esteem, because it would turn out not to be such a big deal. At the end, you'll say your number, and most of the people will agree on the exact one, but very few, if anyone at all, will have noticed that, while the kids were doing their job, a guy (or a woman, very hard to determine) in a gorilla costume has entered the scene from the right, played the fool for a while in the middle of the joyful circle, and walked away to the other side.

The goal of the experiment is to show how human perception is driven by mechanisms, among which is the focusing of attention, which can make it so selective that people may fail to detect things otherwise perfectly evident and seemingly hard not to notice. This will probably remind surveillance ATCO readers of how, in the first phases of their radar training, they were so concentrated on picking precisely the right moment to assign a heading that they completely missed the unknown blip strolling across the display.

Alternative inferences are also possible. My favourite suspect is that gorillas are actually among us, exploiting some special power which makes them temporarily visible only to Discovery Channel cameras. Like it or not, this would at least account for all that hair in your shower drain. Anyway, this will not be the teacher's official standpoint and I am not in a position to argue. Instead, let's take this as an additional chance to consider a few thoughts on the subject of humans and safety, and relevant training.

A basic assumption is generally that humans make mistakes. As a matter of fact, the usage of the word mistake itself may be considered wrong, as specialists apply it to one specific category of errors, which also include slips and lapses, and that already gives you the idea of a complex, though indeed fascinating world. Never mind taxonomies, it is a recognised fact that doing something wrong is part of our very own nature; this we realised a long time ago, and any of us would readily admit this if asked for our opinion. Nevertheless, our errors in everyday life still tend to catch us by surprise and afterwards we ask ourselves how it could have happened.

An Italian journalist and writer once drew a clever picture of this . A spectator at Roland Garros in the 80's, he happens to watch a match between a local player and the German Boris Beck-

er. Becker, whom readers of my generation will certainly remember, ranks number one in the ATP, the best tennis player in the world, and he truly is at the top of his glittering career (not that it really matters, but I used to be a fan of Stefan Edberg). Still, when it comes to smashing a not particularly demanding lob, he "puts together his eighty kilos of power, the thousands of hours spent repeating that same gesture, his youth given away bouncing to a wall, the billions earned by doing it in front of people, the hundreds of matches won and lost, the thousand moments exactly like that already lived, always the same, and loads them all into his racket as he rotates it behind his back, raises it up over his head and perfectly hits that yellow ball". And buries it into the net. The message is clear and simple: "there is nothing to be done - if Becker fails on that stupid ball, why shouldn't you miss your life smashes?"

Accident statistics, and not only those in aviation, show a variable, but invariably significant percentage of human errors or, rather, human-factor related elements, as causal factors. Human involvement in any sort of activity is virtually inevitable, and even tasks fully performed by machines are still subject to some human contribution, even if it is only defining the processes they accomplish or designing them. So, once we have subscribed to the "errare humanum est" point of view, we are caught in the syllogism that humans do wrong, all things involve humans, therefore all things (may) go wrong.

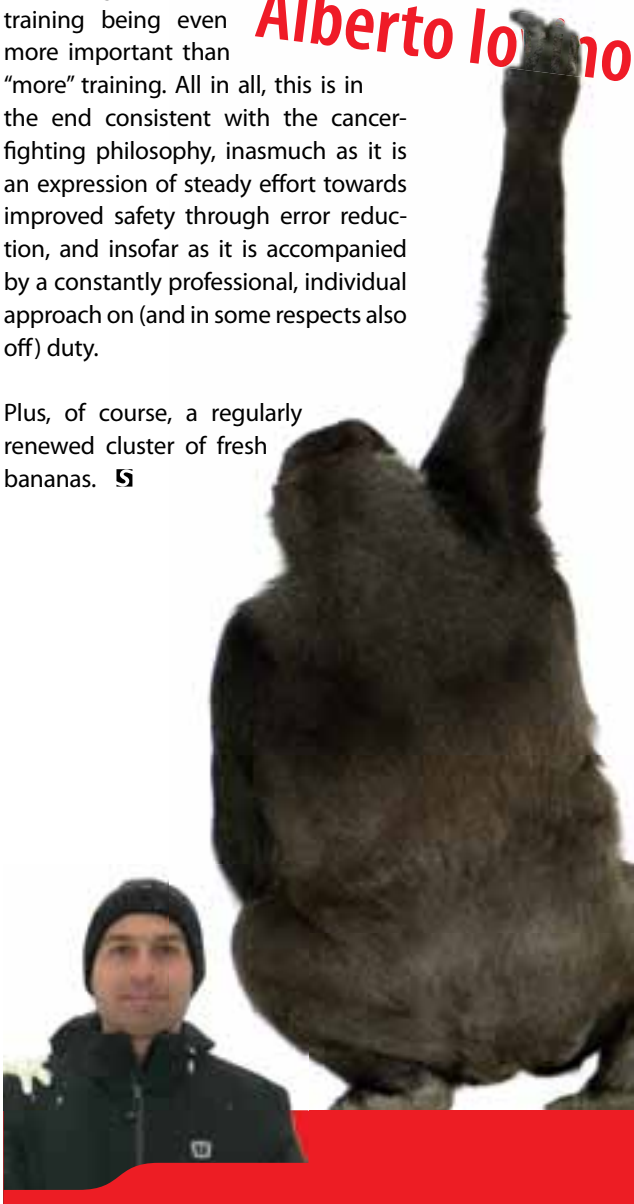
Lots of common sense in that, though not far from the scientific approach, and at least one risk. In fact, what we now do is to go and look for the organisational factors that encourage a certain behaviour, for the latent failures that created preconditions for an error and for changes and actions that can help people to do the right thing. Many recommendations after occurrence investigation and analysis include the need for more or better training. The risk is complacency.

Such an alternative perspective on the matter is made available by Dr Tony Kern who, at an NTSB Aviation Safety Forum last summer, pointed out once more how we possibly went a bit too far in the "nothing to do" direction, proposing a catchy parallelism with our attitude towards cancer: though that disease may be seen as innate, we still actually keep on considering it a disease and we keep on fighting it and, while its full defeat remains a conceptual goal, we have at any rate achieved dramatic improvements over time. In Kern's words, errors do happen, but just saying that to err is human "gives up far too much ground"; after technology, systems, procedures and training, the final focus is on personal behaviour, where a lack of "professionalism" can bring the whole building down by what reports may refer to as inexplicable deviations from standard operating procedures.

There's neither the room nor the need to go deeper into this approach here, which one may legitimately accept as a useful counterbalance to a sort of involuntary, generalised fatalism, or instead as a reversion towards a blame culture; food for thought, a bit exotic perhaps. In truth, even beyond the author's intention, one can give various readings of the assumption that training someone to do something right does not imply simultaneously training them not to do it wrong.

In this issue of Hindsight, you will find out a lot about the importance of training, and share very valuable considerations and ideas about it, including the feeling of "better" training being even more important than "more" training. All in all, this is in the end consistent with the cancer-fighting philosophy, inasmuch as it is an expression of steady effort towards improved safety through error reduction, and insofar as it is accompanied by a constantly professional, individual approach on (and in some respects also off) duty.

Plus, of course, a regularly renewed cluster of fresh bananas.



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